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Cultural Transmission at School. Previous Experiences – Typical Symptoms of Educational Practice – Suggested Solutions

School is entering the culture, not merely preparing for it.

J. Bruner

*In order to be a real participant in the world of culture, I need the culture of another person.
I cannot limit myself to allowing them to be different. I must somehow introduce their culture,
its values and truths into the sphere of my own thinking. I must undertake
an inner dialogue with this other culture and this different way of thinking.*

*This is not only tolerating something unlike but also understanding
that without this Other I cannot be myself.*

V.S. Bibler

Abstract

The suggestion comprised in this study for bringing education closer to natural conditions of cultural transmission may become an interesting pedagogical offer. This proposal also involves abandoning the traditional ideology of cultural transmission, which reflects children's development on the basis of the correlation of their behaviour with particular cultural standards. The suggested offer assumes that the processes of both culturization and (primary and secondary) socialization enables learners' rooting into a culture (the assimilation of the existing cultural values), as well as their acquiring a particular place in the community. On the other hand, owing to children's subject-oriented self-fulfillment abilities, these processes allow children to "create" new, socially accepted values in the form of cultural products, which entails the creation of a "new" quality of a particular group or a new culture of society.

Key words: *school, multi – and intercultural education, cultural transmission, educational practice.*

Introduction: contemporary school as a “learning culture”

What seems to be emphasized in the current understanding of school and education is a particular role of culture, perceived “not only as the heritage, a universe of mankind’s creative achievements, but with this term we define the humanistic quality of man’s activity and lifestyle. Education is a way to making culture real, first of all ‘the culture in people’. Thus, education and culture are interrelated – education enlightens and culture differentiates, being also an ‘effect’ of education. Owing to this, the unceasing process of developing the culture itself is taking place” (Wojnar, 1996, p. 25; Lewowicki, 2004; Ogrodzka-Mazur, 2007).

According to J. Bruner’s concept, the acceptance of the thesis about culture as the basic orientation of modern education results in defining school as a learning culture. The basic task of such school is supporting children in learning how to use tools in order to create meanings and in the adjustment to the world in which they are situated, as well as in changing it due to the needs. Other fundamental tasks of this school focus on shaping learners’ identity and self-esteem and on enhancing chances for handling the world both at school and outside it (Bruner 1996, p. 69; Bruner 2006). Socio-cultural transformations occurring in Poland and the birth of multicultural society and communities hinder (especially children’s) “decoding” the multitude of meanings of the surrounding reality and forming their own identity. Therefore, does modern early school education help children to learn and understand the cultural heritage and, at the same time, to overcome the myth that being tied to tradition (to well-consolidated for many centuries values and norms of cultural behaviour) is a source of good and of children’s rooting into the values which would become significant for the development of their identity (Korzeniecka-Bondar, 2003)? Does it prepare learners for life and broadening their views on the past, present and future with simultaneous abandoning the myth that the best system of values is the one settled a priori by adults and which prefers “the values of the departing generation”? Does education really involve a chance for supporting cultural variety and for protecting it – on the one hand, from globalization, and on the other, from the discrimination of (ethnic, religious) minority groups, as well as a chance for overcoming the myth that the Other is alien and hostile?

Transmission of culture as an educational ideology – from school transmission of culture to cultural transmission

Besides romanticism and progressivism, transmission of culture is one of the oldest currents in the Western educational ideology which highlights the task of passing to the present generation the knowledge, norms and values accumulated in the past. In educational work, it is assumed that “the knowledge and values first located in culture are later internalized by children through the imitation of adult behaviour models or through direct education with the use of reinforcement and punishment. [...] The school of cultural transmission, oriented towards society, emphasizes what is common and settled and focuses on the necessity to learn through the subordination to social order” (Kohlberg, Mayer, 1993, p. 54). Even though it is currently stressed that such an approach to cultural transmission mainly reflects children’s development through the concordance of their behaviour with particular cultural standards and does not refer to their personal knowledge or experience, it is still the dominant (in the educational reality) transmission of culture at school. In the opinion of D. Klus-Stańska, this transmission is based on an attempt to “select out of the cultural heritage some of its elements in a particular form in order to present them as the only valid version of the description, explanation and interpretation to be registered and consolidated” (Klus-Stańska, 2002, p. 77). In this way, teachers most frequently provide “ready” and unequivocal information on cultural values, obtained mainly from school syllabuses and/or course books. Cultural transmission implemented in such a way becomes a means of symbolic violence towards learners through imposing meanings and the unified interpretation on them (by instilling particular values in the consecutive generations). This gets special significance at the first educational stage, in which a substantial number of children – entering the system of organized and methodical learning – experience a strong enculturation shock, determined by the difference between the cultural systems (values) of family home and of their school.

Some other opportunities come with the cultural transmission which enables the personal and social reconstruction of the existing culture by learners’ natural rooting in the culture of the community. What occurs here is the creation of personal worlds within commonly shared meanings – a dialogue meeting with the culture and the Other (Klus-Stańska, 2002, p. 77). The suggestion for bringing early school pedagogy closer to natural conditions of cultural transmission may become a valuable pedagogical offer which can find application in educational practice.

In search for the model (new models) of constructing knowledge at school

Cultural contexts

I. Child – culture – education relation

In approaching the *child – culture – education* relation, early school pedagogy applies (may apply) the cultural orientation, which links the sphere of culture with values and personal self-development and which puts emphasis on the freedom and self-declaration of the individual. According to this:

- the individual possesses certain independence towards culture, which consists in the freedom of relating to it (outside or inside) and to the possible cultural determinism. Self-awareness is a form of this relating and this freedom constitutes the specificity (the essence) of man;
- a specifically human way of existing is the orientation towards values as elements of culture. Intuitively, the individual anticipates and concretizes them, and the elements attract the individual. This is the freedom not towards culture, but within culture (Jagodzewska, 1995, p. 26; Burszta, 2008; Giddens, 2008).

In the suggested approach, what becomes important in early education are both the processes of cultivation and of (primary and secondary) socialization, which enable learners' rooting into a culture (assimilation of the existing cultural values), as well as their acquiring a particular place in the community. On the other hand, owing to the individual's subject-oriented self-fulfillment abilities, these processes allow children to "create" new, socially accepted values in the form of cultural products, which entails the creation of a "new" quality of a particular group or of the culture of society.

II. Creating the feeling of multidimensional cultural identity

Shaping the feeling of children's multidimensional cultural identity in the individual and social perspective also constitutes their self-declaration, which they must be able to develop in the process of gradual growing up and to reformulate in the course of their whole life. The individual's orientation developing in this way in the surrounding cultural reality results in the system of "meanings" formulated by significant (for the individual) people in particular family, school and out-of-school situations. At the same time, they become a source of various values (their possible "readings") and they develop the ability to evaluate the acquired

knowledge and experience. The sources of information about one's own person which might become the foundation for shaping the early school child's sense of identity in natural and constructed educational situations are, among other things, the following:

- observation of one's own behaviour and its consequences;
- observation of other people's behaviour and comparing to these people;
- obtaining information directly from other people (other people's opinions about oneself);
- social categorizations associated with the awareness of belonging to particular social groups (categories) – e.g. family, school, peer group, region, nation, Europe and the world;
- insight into one's own personality.

III. Sensitizing to the Other and realizing the unlikeness of people from other cultures – towards the modification of ethnic stereotypes and prejudices

Perception of the social world in late childhood involves learners' already acquired knowledge about co-occurrence of different human qualities and about various types of people and their typical behaviour patterns, which generates an individual way of viewing Others by children. The results of the research into these issues confirm the occurrence of all types of stereotypes and prejudices in all age periods among children aged 7–13. The analyses of empirical data concerning Polish learners indicate that they have a relatively well-crystallized and rather strongly negative attitude to most of the minority groups living in Poland. Unlike their peers from West European countries, the acquired attitudes of dislike towards others are maintained for a long time (Weigl, 1995, pp. 321–326; Weigl, 1999, p. 31). Among other things, the following determinants support and strengthen the stereotypes and prejudice which constitute a specific “paradigm of the Other” perceived by children:

- factors related to *social structure* (social norms which function in the family and school environment, models of social interaction which prevail in the peer group, social indifference and passiveness towards different symptoms of prejudice and discrimination);
- *personality* factors (lack of tolerance, authoritarianism, conformist tendencies, frustration and aggressive behaviour, low social status of the living environment);
- *cultural* factors – ideologies valid in a particular culture, prejudices which appear in early socialization (Czykwin, 1999, pp. 122–123).

These factors largely contribute to stereotypical consolidation in children's consciousness of the image of themselves and others, regardless of the acquired experience and cultural competence. Analyzing the experimental studies concerning the modification of stereotypes and prejudice among early school learners allows for confirming children's clearly seen proneness to influences aiming at the acquisition of negative attitudes to alien ethnic groups or nations, as well as their proneness to actions which weaken such stereotyping and prejudice (Weigl, 1999, pp. 140–142). This creates a chance for undertaking educational activities which aim at “weakening” the consolidated negative stereotypes and prejudice and at their modification.

IV. Communication and cultural dialogue

Language constitutes the basis for both “being” in one's own culture and understanding other cultures. For the child, it is a ‘tool’ for communication with the environment, a ‘medium’ for creative activity and an object of cognition. In the last decades, due appreciation of the pragmatic factor has drawn researchers' attention to the analysis of children's speech in the aspect of the processes of social communication. “In this way, social structure becomes a substrate of the child's experience resulting from multiple linguistic processes” (Kozielecki, 1997, p. 208). From this point of view, it should be assumed that whenever children talk or listen to other people's speech, the process takes place of strengthening their social structure and forming their cultural identity. This phenomenon can also be interpreted as follows – individuals get control over their social roles through the process of communication.

Children's functioning in the cultural environment enables their systematic linguistic contact with their peers – members of other communities and societies. Furthermore, this often generates natural situations which involve simultaneous participation in two cultures and two language systems. Bilingualism acquired in this way may have the “adding” character (allowing for achieving high competence in both languages) or the “subtracting” one, in which the more prestigious language (of the majority or the dominating culture) replaces the first language (of the minority culture) and does not allow the individual to acquire proper competence in any of them (Urban, 1997, pp. 94-95; Czykwin, Misiejuk, 2002). What seems worth attention from the standpoint of educational activities in integrated education is the so-called *integrating* communication. It is the foundation of intercultural dialogue, which links the values of different cultures and allows for mutual contact on the basis of cooperation, at the same time eliminating conflict situations and the communication *protecting against the possible lack of acceptance in the new cultural*

environment. In such communication the child does not associate cultural elements of both language systems and borrows from the new culture the selected elements which allow for avoiding the inner conflict – the situations of tension and stress (Nikitorowicz, 2000, pp. 85-104, Nikitorowicz, 2009).

Cognitive contexts

I. Motives for familiarizing with the world and learning

Developing the child's cognitive processes and the orientation in the surroundings is an important goal of early school education. This development is characterized by strong motivation for learning the surrounding world of people, things and phenomena, and for acquiring (by learning) the social competences which determine efficient functioning in both school and non-school social situations. Developmental theories, which draw attention to the cultural and social context of education, emphasize the role and significance of the dual social structure in which the child takes part. The structure consists of the relation with peers – the children's world – and the "objective reality", already existing, created and imposed by adults – the adults' world (Berger, Luckmann, 1983; Erikson, 2000; Łaciak, 1998). The dichotomous nature of the functioning of both social worlds in children's life necessitates fulfilling their basic needs, which appear in the process of:

- symbiosis (tight junction and unity with the nearest environment) – the need for *bonds*,
- closeness and acceptance, which determines the sense of safety in the world of people;
- separation (gradual emerging of I from the symbiotic unity) – the need for *identity*, which
- enables building the borders I – other people;
- individualization (development of the inner autonomy of I) – the need for *self-fulfillment*;
- exploration of the surroundings, independent activity, which expresses one's own I (Małkiewicz, 2002, pp. 16-17).

The needs for bonds, identity and self-fulfillment become basic determinants of the pace, dynamics and direction of the child's cognitive activeness (including the creative one), which enables children their close relation with the near and further cultural environment. This environment also facilitates "building" the representation of one's own person, which is associated, among other things, with keeping one's own identity, with maintaining or increasing one's position in the

social system of meanings, and with having an influence upon the surrounding reality (Reykowski, 1990, p. 47).

II. Constructing knowledge at school: learning through cultural dialogue and contact

Early school pedagogy entails the need for a different approach to the process of the child's acquisition of knowledge – the transition from monologue education to dialogue education, which is related to creating meanings. As J. Bruner, the author of the expression 'interpretation turn', emphasizes: "creating meanings is associated with situating meanings with the world in the appropriate cultural context in order to learn 'what this is about'. Although meanings are placed in the mind, they have their source and references in the culture in which they are created. This cultural situating of meanings ensures both the ability to become a subject of negotiation and the immersion in communication" (Bruner, 1996, p. 3). This assumption brings about changes in education theories concerning the following areas:

- the teacher's knowledge – the significance of personal pedagogical theories, personal reflection upon one's own practice, focus on alternative pedagogical solutions;
- the learner's knowledge – the existence of many "possible worlds" and their interpretations, understanding dialogue, readiness for "disobedience in thinking", creative thinking, the concealed school programme;
- classroom communication – social character of learning, group cooperation aiming at a common goal (task), the investigative and creative function of speech, the significance of exploratory speech (thinking aloud);
- didactic designing – spontaneous experimentation, guidelines, improvisation, goals understood as intentions and general aims (Klus-Stańska, 2002, pp. 65-67).

Ending: culture and education – prospects for the relation

Outlining the prospects for the *culture and education* relation involves applying a fundamental assumption that education might be understood solely through the comprehension of culture. This assumption results in some major guidelines for educational theory and practice:

- presenting (by school) the specific sensitivity to the changing contexts of modern culture by, among other things, implementing new strategies of thinking and acting in the work of both teachers and learners;

- preparing children for participation in the changing culture by acquiring the competence of understanding this culture and for specifying one's own place in it;
- directing education towards constructing learners' multidimensional cultural identity;
- building school as a space of human interactions (the transition from monologue education to cultural dialogue).

Thus, as J. Bruner notices, education should not "be limited merely to casual school issues, such as curricula, standards, or verification of learners' performance. What we decide to do in regard to school has sense only when it is considered in a broader context of what society aims at through investing in education of the young. Understanding education [...] is a function of the way in which the culture and its aims, not only the declared ones, are viewed" (Bruner, 1996, p. 4).

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